Trumpeter (1997)
ISSN: 0832-6193

Towards a Descriptive, Participatory theory of Environmental Policy Analysis and Project Evaluation: Research Summary

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This study examines the philosophical, analytic-methodological, and policy-procedural aspects of the contemporary environmental crisis, within the context of environmental decision-making over the past four millennia. My two primary goals are: (1) to develop the theoretical foundations for expanding the scope of conceptualizing, framing, and evaluating the environmental impacts of alternative projects and policies and (2) to suggest a methodology for integrating incommensurable quantifiable considerations with qualitative, ethical and value-based considerations. I focus on assessment problems where large numbers of alternatives predominate, incompatible assessment criteria exist, and multiple, often conflicting, goals prevail. Rather than attempt to prescribe particular decisions, I offer an alternative, descriptive paradigm for guiding the evaluation of projects and policies. Chapter 1 selectively surveys the history of environmental awareness from Gigamesh to the present. I argue that unresponsiveness to environmental degradation results more from value conflicts and insufficient understanding than simple ignorance. Chapter 2 introduces the class of "wicked,"1 or dilemma laden, problems of which environmental problems are a subset. Building on the concepts of environmental impact statements and technology assessments, I outline ten tenets for approaching "wicked problems", which reflect the bounds and plural nature of rationality as well as the behavioral limitations of information processing. Chapter 3 explores the feasibility of extending benefit-cost analysis to redress "wicked problems" and highlights the limitations of economic methodology. I suggest that the primary role of economic analysis in environmental policy analysis and project evaluation should be limited to cost-effectively choosing economically efficient ways to meet morally justifiable and socially desirable ends. Chapter 4 critically reviews and evaluates the suitability of multi-attribute approaches for addressing "wicked problems", in response to the limitations of economic rationality. Chapter 5 outlines a descriptive theory of environmental policy analysis and project evaluation grounded in multi-attribute analysis and participatory democracy. This theory supports adaptive learning, including dynamic preference formation, via an interactive scenario-based procedure for exploring the effect and sensitivity of trade-off relations under alternative objective weightings (value perspectives). Chapter 6 critically evaluates the efficacy of this theory and considers its applications and extensions.

Note

1. Rittel, Horst W. and Melvin M. Webber. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences 4* (1973): 155-169

Citation Format

Glasser, Harold (1997) Towards a Descriptive, Participatory theory of Environmental Policy Analysis and Project Evaluation: Research Summary *Trumpeter*: 14, 1.
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